

Sacred Meditation

in Judaism and Christianity (21 May '24)

15 Sets of Practices for Worship, Home, and Public



Calm, attentive flow of a stream

by Richard Jewell, MA in Theol., MDiv, San Francisco Theological Seminary
MA in English, Saint Cloud State University

With Comments by [Others]

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A flower-strewn path through woods to endless waters

INTRODUCTION: SACRED MEDITATION AND SCRIPTURES

What is “Sacred Meditation”?

I was in front of a small, rural church the first time I felt the Presence of God. I was fourteen. I was attending its conservative, two-week summer Bible School program because all my friends were there. A white light full of peace and power came down into the very top of my head. I was filled with love and calm for a week.

Many ways work to experience the Spirit, whether the first time or often. Some people feel an omniscient Presence throughout nature; others, a white light or Spark of the Divine inside; still others, a spiritual Love in their hearts. The ways of the Presence coming to us are as many as there are people to receive it. Afterwards, the initial wonderful experience that fills us often gradually recedes. And we wonder, “Is it possible to have this experience—to feel alive and filled with such grace—more often?”

The answer is, “Yes.” You can wait for more. Or you can do something. Judaism’s Book of Isaiah says, “Fear not, for I am with you...for I am your God;

I strengthen you and I help you, I uphold you....” (41:10). The Book of Matthew in the Christian Bible adds, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (7:7).

Think of this book, *Sacred Meditation*, as a Guide to different ways to knock at God’s door. But why? Aren’t the instructions already in the scriptures? Yes, but they are intertwined with stories, histories, poetry, and predictions. Here they are identified, simplified, and offered in several short methods.

Wouldn’t it be nice if connecting to the Presence were as easy as calling Him/Her up on your phone and asking if s/he can give you a few minutes of time? Surprisingly, it is that simple—or it can be. God is but a breath (or a spiritual phone call) away. But getting the number and establishing a clear connection seem hard sometimes.

This is why reading, writing, and talking about “going to God” can help. For starters, they may aid you in identifying where or when you already may have experienced a conversation with Presence (with or without words). It may have been brief; you may not even think of it as the handshake and nod that it was. Or perhaps you have had one or more intense experiences. Either way, our Biblical traditions offer many examples described here.

And if you haven’t had a talk with Presence, it is likely you’ve brushed by its robes. Using “sacred” meditation practices can show you the waiting open door.

Experiment freely! Choose whichever chapter, here, appeals to you. Try one or more techniques.

And enjoy yourself! You’re not going to be effective unless you discover and practice what feels relatively simple, interesting, or right to you.

How long must you meditate? First, let’s get rid of “must.” You don’t have to sit in an exact pose on the floor for a traditional 30 min. once or twice a day. Instead, you’re welcome to sit in a chair, stand, lie down, or walk: all are traditional positions. Do try to keep your spine relatively straight. You even can exercise: all the popular classes in yoga, qi gong, tai chi, and other postures and movements (including physical therapy) work, no matter how slow or fast, strenuous or relaxing, if you do them meditatively or mindfully.

As for the so-called 30-minute rule, banish the thought. Or at least reconsider it. A 2011 University of Waterloo research study—of hundreds of graduate students—compared meditation length of time among those trained in mindfulness vs. an untrained control group. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to what you are doing without allowing interrupting thoughts. The results regarding time were that even 10 minutes per day

“prevented the increase of mind wandering...and appeared to promote a switch of attentional focus from the internal to present-moment external world” (Xu et al.).

However, the researchers noted, other studies suggest that for best effect, participants must regularly practice what they’ve learned. Still other studies show that the effects of meditation go away if you stop. How often should you meditate? Once a week might be an absolute minimum. Once or twice a day, even if just 10 minutes at a time, works well, too.

What’s in This Book? A Variety of Methods

After my first experience of Presence in that rural, conservative church, I assumed that what I had seen and felt was the one way that everyone found God. But gradually I began having other experiences. And I discovered many options in a much broader tradition of our religious heritages..

The existence of a variety of methods certainly rings true in almost four thousand years of Judaism and Christianity. In the scriptures and methods gathered here, I am not concerned about scholarly debates of source authorship. Those can be important for establishing the history of the two religions. However, the spiritual practices incorporated into the Judaic-Christian scriptures are real and stand on their own. From whatever the ancient sources, they encompass methods of seeking Presence that long have been considered worthwhile in their own nature. Because of them, hundreds of millions of people in each generation discover some kind of closeness to the sacred.

In each chapter, I briefly introduce a type of meditation with scripture and sometimes other relevant information. Then I describe—in large-print italics—two to six options for meditation practice. After each set are brief spiritual responses.

The Translations

The versions of the two bibles used here—one Jewish, the other Christian—are among the most recent from top language and bible scholars. They come from two well-respected sources.

The scriptures in Judaism’s bible, the **Tanakh** (often an almost exact parallel of the Christian “Old Testament”) are from the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translations at *Sefaria.org* online. They also are available in print form.

Scriptures from Christianity's **New Testament** are from the *New Revised Standard Version updated edition* (NRSVue) by the National Council of Churches. They are available at *BibleGateway.com* and also in print form.

Both editions are admired by scholars and readers. Each one was translated and edited by experts from a variety of major Jewish and Christian organizations. The translations use recent linguistic, archeological, and historical research while retaining graceful language.

The Books of the Two Bibles

Here is a helpful basic guide to the two bibles:

The Jewish Bible: “*The Tanakh*” (verse by verse, very similar to the Christian *Old Testament*)

- (a) ***Torah*** (The Pentateuch: The Five Books of Moses)
- (b) ***Nevi'im*** (The Prophets)
- (c) ***The Writings/Wisdom*** (Psalms, Song of Solomon, Daniel, et al.)

The Christian Bible: “*The Old and New Testaments*”

Old Testament (verse by verse, very similar to the Jewish *Tanakh*)

New Testament:

- (a) **The Four Gospels** (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
- (b) **The Acts of the Apostles** (one book)
- (c) **The Letters** (Letters to Churches by Paul and others)
- (d) **Book of Revelation** (The Apocalypse of John)

PRACTICES



A fountain of blue flowers on a tall, narrow stem

1. PRAY WITH PURPOSE

The Judaic and Christian traditions encourage much talking to God. A prayer often is defined by having some kind of content such as words. But in sacred prayer, this content is just the medium between additional parts: your attention, and the Presence who is listening. Silent prayer also is encouraged.

Prayer occurs at the very beginning of the shared scriptures of Jews and Christians (Genesis 4:26). Many prayers to God are spontaneous or individual,

such as those collected in the Psalms. Others are formal rituals for repeated use: in group worship, work, childbirth, battle, and the rest of life. In their early centuries, the Hebrew priests led rituals with incense, animal sacrifice, scriptural prayers, and songs of lamentation and joy, all of it aimed at God.

Over time, Judaism developed a greater literacy than many cultures around them, with most boys and girls learning to recite scripture—and to pray on their own by repeating Biblical scripture. They also had the free-form examples of their prophets, who lamented the failures of Israel and of their own lives (as in Job), joyfully celebrated victories, and prayerfully enjoyed love (as in the Psalms and Song of Songs).

Similarly, the Christian New Testament encouraged praying aloud in groups and in rituals such as The Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who art in heaven..."). It also followed the gradual trend of Second-Temple Judaism (560 BCE-70 CE) of encouraging individual creative prayer.

Singing in both the Tanach and the New Testament also were ways of praying (e.g., "be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God," Ephesians 5:18-20). Like Judaism, Christianity emphasized three parts to the process: the content of the prayer, the person or group praying attentively, and the listening Presence.

In both traditions, prayer using silence also is mentioned. This silence itself becomes the content of the prayer, even to the point of merging with the person who is praying, with the Presence, or both. Psalm 4:4-5 says, "the LORD hears when I call to Him. So...ponder it on your bed, and sigh/be still." Psalm 62:6 tells us to "wait quietly for God." Diana Lobel speaks of how famous medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides offered a "dictum" that "silence is praise to You [God]" (54). She suggests that this "enjoins not only outer silence, but inner silence as well: the silence of awe." In this way, silent prayer becomes an empty vase or jar through which the Presence echoes.

Regarding still or near-silent prayer, the Christian Gospel of Matthew instructs, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (6:7-8).

Whether with words or in silence, scripture suggests that we not think of just ourselves when praying. Rather, we should aim our prayers toward Presence. Or, at the least, we should hold an awareness that even as we pray, the Presence actively is listening. (For more on this, see the last four paragraphs of this book, "Conclusion: The 'I-Thou' of Meditation.")

Meditations for Praying with Purpose

Practice A, Say Anything: Pray with your inner talk or outer voice. Take several deep breaths. Settle comfortably. Then start praying. Be moderate and meaningful, loud and chaotic, or even emotional. Speak using ritual words or your own. Write your prayer. Draw pictures to God as prayer. Sing with or without words. Dance, ritually or using freeform. Whatever you choose, aim your prayer at the Presence—wherever and however you imagine She, He, or It may be.

Practice B., Say Nothing: Pray using silence. Take several deep breaths. Be at peace with yourself—or find a time when or place where you are feeling your greatest calmness. Settle into your body: let its sensations neither attract nor distract, but rather exist just as a backdrop. Wait without the busyness of thought, in pregnant silence, for anything or nothing to happen. Remain clear within—a bowl of clean, still water—as an invitation to the Presence. If it helps keep you focused, use a simple, repetitive word, phrase, or image as if you are a songbird circling in the sky or a fish circling in a pond.

Practice C: Verbal Fasting. A long-respected practice in monastic communities is to stop speaking for an entire day, week, or longer. To make this work, you must not have exceptions (except in an emergency). If you can't find a day for practicing it, then start with a half day. Let your mind grow calmer. Or, at least, back away from your thoughts by slowly becoming the Watcher: observe your thoughts but stop adding to them. Relax your face, jaw, and throat, and let your thoughts slide into nothingness. You may practice this in isolation or around others who also are verbally fasting.

Comments

In college, I had a close friend who was a New York Jew. He taught me, a Midwestern Christian, much about his culture. One of the most important was about how, he said, Jews pray. He told me, in words much like this, "Jews don't just talk nicely to God. They sing! They dance! Sometimes they cry or laugh. They even get mad at God—'Why did you do this to me, Lord!'"

like the prophet Jonah, angry at Yahweh for not destroying the city of Ninevah. At the time, I was not practicing prayer. But when I did start again years later, this lesson helped me let go and give the Presence whatever I was feeling at the time, joy, anger—and my love.

[More comments]



White flowers with purple strands from the core

2. WORSHIP MINDFULLY

What is worship? The Psalms tell us, “Raise a shout to the LORD, all the earth, break into joyous songs of praise! Sing praise to the LORD with the lyre...and melodious song. With trumpets and the blast of the horn raise a shout before the LORD” (98:4-6). “Let them praise His name in dance; with timbrel and lyre let them chant His praises (149:3).

The Christian New Testament says, “Let the word of God dwell in you richly; teach...one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the Lord/God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:16-17). “[P]ray for one another, so that you may be healed” as “prayer...is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Exodus tells us to “observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread...for all time” (12: 17). In the Gospel of Matthew, “Jesus took a loaf of bread [and] gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat...’ Then he took a cup...saying, ‘Drink from it...’” (26:26-28).

The active verbs or their cognates in all of these are “shout,” “sing,” “praise,” “chant,” “let it dwell,” “teach,” “do,” “give thanks,” “pray,” “observe,” “take,” “eat,” and “drink.” Igor Stravinsky, the famous Russian

composer and conductor of classical music, said, “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also” (Stravinsky and Craft). Just as you may learn active listening, so may you practice active worship. In addition, the rituals of more formal services versus those that are more casual may differ, but each has its own verbs for pursuing Spirit.

Attending temple or church (or worshipping on your own) can be a great quiet period or even a needed escape. However, if we are mostly taking stock of what happened yesterday or planning for tomorrow, that is not worship. It requires energy, focus, and practice.

Meditations for Worshipping Mindfully

Practice A: Mindful Ritual. As you engage in a ritual, whether in a group or on your own, stand, sit, or kneel comfortably with a reasonably straight (left-right aligned) backbone. Take several deep breaths. Then practice mindfulness: consciously be attentive to what you are doing, and let go of unrelated thoughts and feelings. Give yourself over to the ritual itself: the words, sounds, movements, and physical sensations. Be with them. If your mind strays for long, take slow, calming, deep breaths to bring it back to what you are doing, hearing, and seeing. In each minute, make the ritual new. Live it now.

Practice B: Focal Point. During worship, focus your attention in your heart, or above your head. (If you choose the latter, you may concentrate on the crown of your skull, or you can go as high as above as you wish, even up to the sky or beyond.) Go to that point or place as often as you can while worshipping actively.

Practice C: Meditation during Worship. Learn any of the meditations below, “2-15,” and apply them at a time of your choice during worship.

Comments

After my first experience of Presence, I worked very hard to be mindful of each element of worship. I sang each hymn, said each prayer, and listened to each word carefully, hoping to sense God in it all. God didn’t exactly reveal heaven’s fruits to me very quickly. But I was trying—and practicing being

mindfully attentive during services. Eventually, I discovered that being so focused was its own reward: it brought inner calmness to my mind and feelings and the capacity to understand others more easily. – RJ

[More comments]



Landscape design © Frederik Meijer Gardens. Used by permission

Fish in a pond

3. BREATHE

In the Hebrew language of the Jewish Bible, “breath” is *ruach*. It is pronounced “roo-akh”—so that, when you say it aloud with its “kh” sound, it engages not just the mouth, but also the lungs and even the stomach muscles. In Aramaic—the language Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples most likely spoke, “breath” is similar, *ruhah*—this time with two “h’s” that require even more lung and stomach power. In most of the Christian New Testament, where Greek is used, “breath” is *pneuma*.

More important, in all three languages, this also means “spirit.” As a result, in the Judaic and Christian traditions, every time you take a breath, you are inhaling and exhaling spirit. Try imagining that as you breathe!

Science has a few (well, easily a million or two) words to say about meditative breathing. A large body of evidence shows that long, slow, deep breathing is one of the ways to engage the parasympathetic nervous system,

causing a slower pulse rate, lower blood pressure, greater calm, and, probably, more healing. James Nestor adds in his bestseller, *Breath*, that evidence shows regular inhaling through your nose (not being a “mouth breather”) leads to much better health outcomes.

I’ve always been a shallow breather. Typically, says the medical field, like me, the average person takes a breath 12-18 times per minute. I have learned to sit or stand back often and take a deep breath or two. It makes me think better, feel more alert, and have greater presence in front of groups. Does it help me spiritually? It goes both ways: deep breathing at the beginning of a meditation gives me a greater and long span of focused attention, but also the act of meditating reminds me to breathe more deeply. As a result, with practice, breathing well and meditation can become cyclical.

Such body responses likely are some of the reasons Jews and early Christians encouraged participation in spiritual singing, chanting, and dancing. They had to breathe more deeply, thus oxygenating their organs and brains, which brought them greater calmness and a physical inner glow. *Ruach-ruhah-pneuma* simply gave them clarity and peace.

Breath Meditations

Practice A: Breath Control. *Keep your spine relatively straight while you meditate. Most people sit (in a chair or on a mat) or lie down, but you may, instead, stand, walk, dance or perform yoga or other exercises. Start by taking a long, deep, inhaling breath that lets both your chest and stomach expand. Then slowly let it all out, contracting both your chest and stomach.*

You may breathe like this for an entire meditation. Others use deep breathing just at the beginning. A typical inhale-exhale cycle, says Nestor, is 10-12 seconds. You can divide the time in half for each part, make one slightly longer than the other, or add brief pauses in the middle or end. If you must, start with a shorter cycle, perhaps 4 sec. and 4 sec., especially if you’ve just awakened or you have a small lung capacity. Or if you wish, you may go longer: a single breath cycle of 40-60 seconds or more is common among deep-sea divers and some longtime meditators.

Practice B: Mindful Breathing. *Begin your breathing pattern.*

Practice it for several minutes. then become increasingly mindful of your breath: how it goes in; how it comes out. Also become aware of your body's physical responses as it calms and relaxes. Can you feel individual muscles relaxing? Can you feel your beating heart? When thoughts occur, can you back away from them and watch them, rather than getting caught up in them? Can you relax your face, shoulders, and especially your neck muscles to quiet and decrease such thoughts?

Can you make a sphere around part of you that is entirely clear and calm or, if you need a color, white? Start with a small ball of it in your head or heart and then expand it. In mystical Judaism, Hebrew words for it are hila (emanation of light) and ohr hamakif (enveloping or surrounding light). In Christian mysticism and art, the "halo" is a circle or ovoid sphere above or including the head. Scientists long have measured the electrical field in and around a human extending as far as six feet out from the body. Sphere meditation may help control and calm one's electrical field.

Keep each part of your breath cycle roughly the same length. Don't hurry. Breathe in deeply, and exhale fully.

The exceptions to this slow, steady breathing are special "breath aids" for specific physical needs. For example, you may safely induce sleep (with a long inhale and short, sharp exhale), calm yourself (by holding each nostril closed in turn during breaths), or warm/energize your body (with a short, sharp inhale and long exhale). Start with just ten such breaths; if ineffective, try twenty or thirty. (Caution: Do not try any of these alternative breathing methods when driving or operating machinery, and be careful combining them with strong prescription drugs.)

Comments

In recent years, I have learned to use breath to fall asleep more easily, stay warmer, and especially gain calm more quickly. For example, I used to freeze when one of my students was creating a difficult situation in my classroom. Now, instead, I take several deep breaths, which keeps my mind fluid so that I can more patiently and creatively deal with the problem.

I also remember the first college class where I regularly started with a brief breathing session. They were very bright but rambunctious people,

deeply in need of calming. At first some of them groaned at the imposition. But in a few weeks, after seeing how quickly three minutes of breathing helped them focus and be more attentive, they even began to ask for it. That's why it's helpful in spiritual practices, too.

[More comments]



Violet center with gold highlights

4. LOVE GOD

The Torah phrases the “love commandment” in this way: “You shall love your God [YHWH] with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). The New Testament repeats it slightly differently ways: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27; see also Matt. 22:37 and Mark 12:30). Jesus calls this the “greatest commandment.”

But just what, precisely, does this mean? People often interpret it in the abstract: you should like and think about God. That certainly is one part: it leads to wonderful ethical, social, and cultural guidelines. But this commandment also is a call to meditative practice. The Torah is proclaiming, with Jesus repeating it, that you literally can learn to love God as an act of tenderness, immediacy, and devotion. In doing so, you place the Presence entirely within your arms of protection, devotion, and care like you might for your partner or child—and you in God’s embrace and heart.

The Torah points to this: “there is none like God, [r]iding through the heavens to help you.... The ancient God is a refuge, A support are the arms everlasting” (Deuteronomy 33:26-27).

But how can you even start to love God? Fortunately, it is possible to break the practice into several aspects—each one a method of its own. Begin with whichever one you like.

The truth is that in practicing one of them in meditation, you likely already are combining it with another: as you use your willpower to concentrate on your heart, soul, mind, or God, you are satisfying “all of your might/strength.” In addition, if you focus strongly or thoroughly enough with passion, that may take care of “soul.” Mental thoughts often are the hardest: even more passion may be required.

What about the “love” component of the commandment? Meditate on developing love power—see below. And then, the only question left is, “Where is the Presence that you can love?” See details about that, too, below.

Like all brain and emotional-maturity exercises, proceeding is just a matter of learning and practice. In combination, this set of five practices leads to one of the most powerful meditations throughout the history of the world: to “love the Lord your God” with everything.

Meditations for Learning to Love God

For these meditations, you may sit, lie down, stand, walk, or exercise meditatively. If available, you may want to do them in nature or with nature sounds or sights. Start by taking several long, slow, deep breaths that engage both your lungs and stomach during both inhaling and exhaling.

Practice A: Grow Your Inner Love. Focus on your heart or the center of your chest. If you wish, you may touch the spot with fingers or hands. Build a feeling of love there: start a warm fire. If helpful, begin with how you feel love for someone close. Imagine your breath is blowing on the ember and flames. Or imagine, if you wish, a warm globe of light growing ever brighter within your chest. Feed it until it is a protective shield surrounding you. Then simply dwell quietly and patiently within it for a time. Hold it within yourself or, if you can, give it to the Presence.

Practice B: Find Your Soul. What does the commandment mean by “all of your soul”? It is referring to your deepest psyche or inner self. Start by thinking of who or what you are at your best. Then go deeper

still: look at the “you” who is your pure awareness—the person doing the seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking—often with few or no thoughts—the Observer behind all that you see. That is your soul. Meditate on this version of you, and offer it to God.

Practice C: Develop Inner Strength. What does the Torah (and Luke) mean in this commandment by “strength”? It is your inner power, self-sufficiency, or feeling of being strong. It is your source of self-confidence, assurance, composure, and nerve. One way to sense and let it build is to focus on your solar plexus. Feel it grow—let it expand—and dwell within it for a time. Another method is to feel the glow of your own inner power filling your limbs or body. Then, in either of these ways, give it to the Presence.

Practice D: Become Aware of Your Mind. When the New Testament scriptures say “mind,” what do they mean? It is the part of you that thinks, remembers, decides, and also regulates conscious feelings, emotions, pleasures, and pains. In meditation, focus on this thinking part of you. How does it normally operate? What is it doing now? What does it feel like, within you? Do you imagine it as a verbal center of activity, a space, or what? Concentrate on feeling your sense of this mental self. Watch it mindfully: separate the “you” who observes from your mind’s workings. Let it run while you observe it. Or let it become calm and quiet. Then, either rest in the center of its empty peacefulness, or hand it to the Presence.

Practice E: Find the Presence (God). This often seems hardest of all. What if you never have had an experience of Presence? Then simply look up. Upward is one of the two most-often suggested physical directions for finding God in traditional Judaism, Christianity, and most other major religions. Look above your head or to the sky. The second direction is to look in your heart or beside it in your chest. The scientific reasons for these focuses are psychological: they take you to

places within where most people have positive associations.

As you meditate, you may use an open-ended or wide-focus attention, waiting patiently. Or you may pray, sing, chant, dance, use a visual image, or anything else that helps you stay focused on either of these points or directions.

What if you have had an experience of the Presence? Then look to it. Recall it and go into the middle of it—in memory or experience. In spirit, earnest reestablishes connections.

Comments

The two primary meditations I used for decades were either looking for Presence high above my head or in my heart. Recently, though, I read the Torah and New Testament commandment to “love God with all of your heart, soul, strength/might, and mind.” I realized I could combine both of my own practices by following this precept. It is my new method, my default meditation, and likely will be for years.

[More comments]



Flowers with many purple and yellow petals and green centers

5. LOVE OTHERS AS YOURSELF

Judaic-Christian scriptures tell us that being good to others is of utmost importance. The Torah says, “Love your fellow as yourself” (Lev. 19:19). Jesus of Nazareth repeats this immediately after his restatement of the command to “Love the Lord your God”: ““You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”” he adds. “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31; see also Matt. 7:39 and Luke 6:31). “In everything,” he echoes, “do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

This ethic of reciprocity exists in several religions. In common culture, it sometimes is called the “Golden Rule.”

Golden Rule Meditations

These meditations are mental exercises using memory and imaging. Choose your posture; start by taking several deep breaths.

Practice A: Past. *This first practice uses a type of observation and memory that many psychologists now recommend. It can be uncomfortable initially, but it helps the mind heal by ridding itself of*

the “sting” of recall.

Remember a mistake you may have made in how you treated another person. Don’t rehearse a dozen problems or even two—just one. Remember specifically what you did (but not the results afterward), step by step. What do you and/or the other person look like at the instant you made the mistake? Hold that in your mind (or your heart) like a balloon or a photo; let it sit or float there for several minutes. Allow other images, thoughts, and feelings to drift to it, noting them but not losing the central image.

Don’t allow yourself to start having emotional reactions—just keep holding the central image. Allow other images, thoughts, and feelings to come to the central one as well. When no more appear, then if you wish, you may choose a second related image to hold and see what it attracts. Focus on each in the same way, nonjudgmentally, holding it in the center of your mind or heart, waiting to see what else pops up. When you end your meditation, you then may process logically what you saw (or choose not to, letting it rest and wait in your mind for more exploration).

This method is a mental meditation that uses the power of observation. It slows and breaks down difficult memories so that you are able to process them differently and learn not to react immediately with emotion.

Practice B: Present: *Use the same beginning steps as above, but this time engage your imagination. What is a current situation you are in, or soon will be in, with a specific person or in a specific place, when you could practice treating someone else as you want to be treated? Think of “treating” others as yourself like it is a positive act, a gift you would want here and now in the present. Choose an image of yourself doing this. Hold that image in the center of your mind or heart as in Practice A, and see what other images, thoughts, and feelings show up. Later, logically evaluate how this mental exercise makes you feel.*

Practice C: Future. *With the same pattern as above, choose a mental image of yourself taking on a new but significant change in how you treat others positively. Then imagine yourself applying it to several*

people, one at a time. Hold each image of your act in your mind or heart for at least a minute, letting other images and feelings come to it. Later, examine your several images and determine which might work better.

Comments

I don't much like someone saying I am wronging them. My habit from childhood is to not react outwardly but, inwardly, to stop breathing and feel my negative emotions churning. But over the years, I've learned to take a deep breath and ask myself, "How do they see it from their point of view?"

For example, one time I was parked beside a beat-up old car. I opened my door, which brushed the other vehicle. Before I could get in, I heard a voice behind me say, "Sir, I know I have a piece-of-shit car, but I'd appreciate your not scratching it." I turned and saw a very tired, scruffy-looking, down-on-his-luck young man.

Taking a breath, I thought a few seconds. "You know," I said, "you're absolutely right. I am very sorry. I apologize sincerely." I looked closely at where my door had touched his. "It looks okay. But look at it yourself."

He shook his head.

"I promise you," I added. "I'll be more careful in the future."

He nodded to me, got in his car, and left.

I have worked to keep that promise for years.

[More comments]



Bright red leaves on three trees, seeking sun

6. CHANNEL FAITH

What is “faith”? It is central in the Judaic-Christian tradition. The popular definition is “belief”: an intellectual concept that means “to have a faith”—a religion or set of spiritual guidelines. Another definition is to “hold onto your faith”—your belief—in the face of inner and outer doubts. A third is to “practice your faith,” which often means to practice your religion, worship, or pray.

However, in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, “faith” also can be more like a verb than a noun: a psychological act of “reaching out.” You stretch your hand to Spirit or build a bridge to the Presence.

Remembering this may be easier to imagine if, says Bob Dodson, one calls it “faithfulness” that is a seeking. Professor Eugene W. Lyman of Carleton College also argues for this meaning: “By ‘faith’ I understand that attitude of

free submission of the soul through which the reality and power of God are sought and found" (505). In this meaning, then, faith is not just a passive noun but also an act of will.

In the Hebrew language of the Jewish scriptures and in the spoken Aramaic dialect, faith is *emunah*, "trust" and "fidelity"; or, sometimes, *batach*, "trust" and "reliance." In a vision of Abraham in Genesis, God "took him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars.... So shall your offspring be.' And [Abram] put his trust [*emunah*] in [God]" (15:5-6). The Book of the Prophet Habakkuk announces that "the righteous are rewarded with life [f]or their fidelity [*emunah*]" (2: 4). Proverbs adds, "Trust [*batach*] in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him" (3:5-6). These are calls to focus your conscious attention using your love or your wordless disposition and not just "your own understanding."

In the Greek language of the Christian New Testament, faith is *pistis*, which can mean both "belief" and "trust." The Letter to the Romans says, "The righteous shall live by faith [*pistis*]" and that Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrews, "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God" (1:17, 4:20-21)—an increase in strength likely more than just intellectual thinking. Paul adds in 1 Corinthians, "My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with...the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (2:4-5). In 2 Corinthians, he point out that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (5:7).

One of the most dramatic stories about Jesus of Nazareth frames "faith" as an act of connection. Whether you hear the anecdote as true or metaphorical, it frames faithfulness as a spiritual power:

Soon after Jesus finishes speaking to a large crowd, he sends several disciples off in a boat on the Sea of Galilee while he goes for a walk alone. The wind rises, and the boat becomes "battered by the waves." Then the disciples see Jesus walking on the water toward them. According to Matthew, "[T]hey were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear."

But Jesus calls to them, "'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water...[b]ut became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying..., "'You of little faith, why did you doubt'" (Matthew 14:22-31)?

Peter's "doubt" is not an intellectual one, but rather a physical fear of drowning. "Take heart," Jesus already has told everyone in the boat (echoing

“Love God with all your heart”). When he asks Peter, “Why do you doubt,” he wants Peter to develop trust in God: a psychological attitude or inner reaching out. It is an act we all can learn.

Faith Meditation

Practice A: Going Up the Line. Take several long, deep breaths and settle into a good position with your back straight. Then imagine a long, thin cord, perhaps silver or white, perhaps gold, green, or purple, connecting you to God. If you only can see your end of it, that is fine. Let the other end go high up. Imagine your faith is a power or a strength like a ball or hand of light, one that comes from your will, your love, or your keen observation. Build that power for a few seconds or minutes.

Then send it up the line. Keep sending it, and imagine the Presence in some form receiving it at the other end. Build and maintain this act for five to ten minutes at a time. When you are done, take several more long, deep breaths. With practice, you can create this in adversity in seconds. When you do, you are giving the problem to God.

Practice B: Becoming a Bowl. Breathe deeply, align yourself, and then imagine that you are a vessel. Perhaps you are a wide-open bowl, or maybe a long, deep glass or jar open at the top. Place this vessel in your heart or beside it in your chest, or imagine it in your head. Visualize it as perfectly clear and empty inside, or perhaps is half-filled with a crystal-clear liquid. Open it at its top to Presence.

Then, with your still, small voice or your loving heart, ask God to pour a part of himself—his essence or color—into your receptacle. Imagine this process for five to ten minutes or more. When you are done, take several long, deep breaths, and slowly come out of the meditation.

Practice C: Imagining Presence. Simply meditate, breathing, and know that the Presence is with you. You may imagine or feel it above, all around, in your heart, or in your consciousness itself. Or you may just know it is near. Be calm and safe in the strength and love of the Father-Mother God.

Practice 4: Chanting to Presence. *Speak, chant, or sing to yourself, “God is with me.” Change these words, if you wish, to suit you personally. Repeat it, out loud or quietly within, for five to ten minutes or more. Repeat it with love, strength, and/or calmness as stillness settles around you.*

All of these meditations are acts of faith. You are throwing your heart, soul, mind, and strength to the Presence, or toward it.

Comments

In my meditations now, I aim my love toward my experience of God above me with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind. I have a set of beliefs—a faith. But I do not think about them when meditating. They get in the way of my act of faithfulness, my reaching out to Presence.

[More comments]



Clouds of small purple petals and green buds

7. BE STILL AND KNOW

Jewish scripture says, “**Be still, and know** that I am God” (*Koren Jerusalem Bible*, Psalm 46:11; 46:10 in Christian Bibles).

In the Tanakh, when the prophet Elijah was under threat of death, he went to his mountain retreat. There, an angel told him to stand at attention before God: “And lo, GOD passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by GOD’s power; but GOD was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but GOD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but GOD was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound/a still, small voice” (*JPS*).

How does one hear a “voice” that is “still”? The contradiction is like a Zen Buddhist koan such as “the sound of one hand clapping.” For Elijah it was

what some say is the spark of God within each of us. Elijah spoke to it, and God answered him (I Kings 19:11-12).

In Christianity, the Gospel of Luke says that Jesus “would slip away to deserted places and pray” (5:16). In addition, the Greek word *hēsychios/hēsychia* appears six times in the New Testament. It means “stillness, quiet, a quiet fashion, or quietly” (*New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionary*). Jewish and Christian monastic communities long have used silence as a way to meditate and even to live daily.

Why is stillness so important? St. Augustine of Hippo says that “when the word of God increases [in us], human words fail” (Sermon 288:5), meaning that the Presence of God replaces our verbal talk and thinking. The reverse is true, too: if we work at foregoing much of the talk that rules our days, inner and outer, God can come closer. More recently, popular historian Diarmaid MacCulloch traces the uses of silence in Hebrew, Greek, and Christian times in *Silence: A Christian History*.

Stillness Meditations

For each of these, choose your time, place, and posture; then start with long, deep inhales and exhales for a few minutes.

Practice A: Breathing and Calming. Continue with your deep breathing. Relax your body while maintaining a relatively straight spine. Focus especially on calming your head, neck, and shoulders. Start with the top of your head, work your way down through your cheeks and jaw to your neck, and then relax your shoulders. Let calmness, rest, and peace spread through each muscle. Feel the stillness gradually taking over your mind. Do this for at least 10 minutes.

Practice B: Quieting Inner Talk. As you breathe deeply, focus on your throat muscles. These two vertical muscles in the larynx control your “inner voice”: the self-talk or internal monologue that is a constant companion in many people’s lives. Research on stroke victims whose voice box (larynx) muscles have stopped working shows they also often have verbally-silent minds.

The more you relax the throat muscles, the smaller and more still your inner talk will become. In progressive meditations over days, weeks, and

months, start by relaxing your jaws and then, especially, every last small muscle in your throat and your larynx. If you begin having trouble breathing, turn your head slightly to the side and continue.

Practice C: The “No!” Meditation. *Another way to dissolve inner self-talk is to just say “No!” Say it silently within or speak it aloud when a thought comes to your mind that is not helpful or necessary — or, during a meditation, against every single inner verbal thought.*

Say it as often as needed: rapidly or slowly, loudly and emphatically or quietly. Be as blunt as you must. Condition yourself to identify and stop verbal thoughts with your “No!” You can limit this to meditation only, or practice it whenever you want. Don’t worry about destroying your ability to think. Just tell yourself, “I’ll do my thinking later.”

Practice D: Knowing God. *As you develop more moments of calm and stillness in your practice, look to the center of that silence. What is there? If you begin to feel as if you are on the border of a greater peace, awareness, strength, joy, or love, that is good: it is a door or window opening onto Presence. Focus on it.*

Comments

In many of my meditations, I feel as if I am holding myself pausing between the world of thought and action on the one hand, and waiting for Presence on the other. I am a fluff of seed lofted briefly into the air, or a rider of a roller coaster in its eternal seconds at the top of a height before it plunges down a steep drop. In such instants, I rest and turn to Presence.

[More comments]



Mist rising over a sea at sunset

8. UNCOVER BEAUTY

As humans, we enjoy beauty because it is a seed of God, a gift or fruit of the Spirit. It lifts us on wings of joy, pleasure, and knowing to a felt sense of higher and deeper life. Visual and verbal beauty, for example, are on full display in the Tanakh's Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon. So is the art of both physical and spiritual love.

Beauty in many forms also is in the Psalms. They, too, include the physical. Amy-Jill Levine, Professor Emerita of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School, points out, "Jewish tradition generally does not deny the body; to the contrary, Psalm 139:13-14a praises God, who 'formed my inward parts; / you knit me together in my mother's womb.' The psalmist exclaims, 'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' All bodies are glorious..." (47-48).

Certainly, the Jewish and Christian Bibles do sometimes criticize beauty that is self-centered or vain. But they often praise it in many forms as a gift from Presence to humans.

The Psalms say, "From Zion, perfect in beauty, God appeared" (50.2). "Raise a shout [and] break into joyous songs of praise! Sing praise to the LORD with the lyre...and melodious song" (98:4-6). Ecclesiastes tells us that elements

of story and drama are good: a “time for weeping and a time for laughing, [a] time for wailing and a time for dancing” (3:4).

In the New Testament, Jesus testifies to the attractions of nature: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.... I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Matt. 6:28-29). He refers to music and dancing as normal: “[T]his generation...is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance...’” (Matt. 11:16-17; cf. Luke 7:31-32). He also sang with his disciples at the end of his final Passover meal: “When they had sung the hymn, they went out... (Matt. 26:30). And he also may have done what any other male would at a wedding in Cana: danced with all the other men (John 2:1-11).

Sacred Beauty Meditations

Practice A: Experiencing Beauty. Choose a location, time, and/or place where you will experience beauty: an art performance, museum, book/video, or walk in nature. As you experience it, take several long, deep breaths. Then let the beauty wash over you and flow into your mind, heart, and body. If it is emotionally or physically pleasurable, all the better. Maintain this fullness as long as you can. Appreciate it completely with your mind and feelings open, neither analyzing nor reacting, just being-with it. As it fades, look at the work of art for more details so you can recall it later.

Practice B: Recalling Beauty. On your own in meditation, spine straight, take several deep breaths. Then recall one of your moments of great beauty. Don’t analyze, categorize, or react to it. Instead, simply hold it, still and present, in the center of your mind or heart. Let the feelings you had at that time, sweep over and through you again. Maintain this memory and feeling as long as you can, or move immediately to “Practice C.”

Practice C: Finding the Core of Beauty. In the immediate moment and place of experiencing beauty, or recalling it in meditation, distance yourself from it just enough to offer it to your sense of Presence, external (transcendent) or inner (immanent). Let Presence take it and become the core of it, the seed, the living center. Allow Presence—in the

recreated memory of this beauty—to take over your awareness. Dwell with the Presence—or slip in and out, back and forth, between beauty and Presence—as long as you can, whether for seconds or minutes. After you no longer can sustain this attentive focus, take a moment to recall what just happened so that you more easily can remember it later for further meditation.

Comments

I remember vividly one night when I was helping to create beauty. Four of us were a high school rock band. We were playing on a small stage at a place called Teen-a-Go-Go. In the middle of a song, I began to feel that the dancers before us were the ones causing us to play and sing, and all of us—audience and performers—were a single, united consciousness moving as one. With that feeling came a sense of love, strength—and immanent beauty.

From “Walking in Beauty,” a closing prayer in the Navajo Way Blessing Ceremony:

I walk with beauty before me.

I walk with beauty behind me.

I walk with beauty below me.

I walk with beauty above me. I walk with beauty around me.

My words will be beautiful.

In beauty all day long may I walk.

[More comments]



A river in a miles-long canyon of trees and grass

9. SEEK WILDERNESS

Today, being in wilderness has a relatively new scientific name: “forest bathing” (also known as “nature bathing”). A recent meta-analysis of many studies states it improves the overall well-being of various populations” by “the reduction of anxiety,” “depression,” “negative emotions,” “stress responses,” and some “physiological responses such as heart rate and blood pressure” (Siah et al.).

Many scientific studies have affirmed that nature confers upon us some of the same proven benefits as does meditation: lower blood pressure, slower heart rate, greater calmness, increased ability to focus, and improved health.

In the Jewish and Christian heritage, mystics and prophets “nature bathed” frequently. That is where they found the Presence. The Hebrew word for “wilderness” or “desert” is *midbar*, the uncultivated lands where wild animals roam. It also can mean “speak”—thus it is a place where God may “talk” to us.

The Tanakh in Genesis describes how Noah rode his ark into the wild nature of the Great Flood. In Exodus, Moses spent forty years as a desert shepherd before leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and another forty years guiding them around the desert. He climbed Mount Sinai to talk with God not once, but up to eight times. There God spoke from a burning bush, smoke, thunder, and darkness.

The Prophet Elijah lived in the wilderness, too. On the wilds of Mount Carmel, he won a life-or-death contest against King Ahab’s false priests as God’s fire came down from the sky. Elijah spoke afterward with God’s “soft murmuring sound/still, small voice.” Then he journeyed for days through wilderness to escape assassins sent by Ahab’s consort, Queen Jezebel, by hiding in a cave on Mt. Horeb (I Kings 18-19).

The Qumran community of Jewish Essene ascetics, c. 130 BCE-70 CE, lived and worked in the desert year around. The famous Dead Sea Scrolls, which are ancient Jewish scriptures and Qumran rituals and records, were discovered in the nearby Qumran Caves.

In the Christian New Testament, the Greek word for wilderness, *eremos*, appears 48 times. It means an isolated, uninhabited place. The birth stories of Jesus describe a pregnant Mary travelling several days each way in the wilderness to visit her relative Elizabeth when they were pregnant with the Jesus and John the Baptist. Then she and Joseph made the same trip again to Bethlehem, again several days through the wilds, and back with the young Jesus. And later, the three of them travelled the wilderness and desert to Egypt and back.

Early in the Gospels, John the Baptist, “clothed with camel’s hair” (Mark 1:6), lived “in the wilderness until he appeared publicly” (Luke 1.80). And before starting to teach, Jesus of Nazareth “was led by the Spirit in the wilderness” where he fasted forty days and nights (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-12).

Jesus also often “would slip away to deserted places and pray” (Luke 5.16) even “as his companions hunted for him” (Mark 1:35-6; Luke 4:42). When his cousin John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus’ disciples buried John’s body. “[W]hen Jesus heard this, he withdrew...in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (Matt. 14:11-13).

In addition, as in the Biblical Jewish tradition, an important part of Christian history is its wilderness hermits. They have been early-medieval stylites (who lived on pillars), desert hermits, foreign monks boating to the shores of Ireland, and monks and nuns living in hundreds of monasteries and convents in wilderness locations through medieval times to the present. Why? Simply, it is that Presence often may be found more easily in nature.

Wilderness Meditation: Forest Bathing

Practice A: In person. Choose a tree or forest, stream or lake, or a flower garden or expanse of pasture. You may sit, stand, walk, or run in or around it. Start by breathing deeply several times. Then with eyes open or closed, perform one of the meditations mentioned in these chapters: breathing, focusing, or any other one. Let the calmness of nature around you sink into you. If you can, look for Presence within or beyond.

Practice B: On your device. Turn on your cell, laptop, or connected TV. Find a video with nature scenes and sounds (such as water or birds). Take several deep breaths. Then, lying, sitting, standing, or doing gentle yoga, watch and listen as you meditate.

Practice C: In hot water. The effects of taking a hot bath can be similar to forest bathing. According to the NIH (U.S. National Institutes of Health) website's "A review of Japanese-style bathing" by Yutaka Thochihara, 80% of Japanese take hot baths up to their shoulders regularly.

He reports, "There are...many research reports on the beneficial effects...on sleep..., self-rated health..., rehabilitation..., fatigue..., depression..., and [blood pressure]." His caveat is that the elderly should avoid sudden fainting or cardiac problems by not using cold bathing rooms, not bathing alone, and keeping water at no more than 106 degrees Fahrenheit (41 C.). (Another, more recent study recommends bathing at 110 degrees F. for at least 20 minutes.)

Comments

My wife and I camp in a tent for weeks each summer. Within a few hours, we can feel our bodies slowing to a calm and our souls opening to our surroundings. We feel our heads in the treetops, our fingers among the leaves, and our toes in the grass and roots. Sometimes all the world sings God's joy. Our adult children and our grandchildren join us for several days, and their presence also becomes part of the song as we hike, eat, and talk together with family.

[More comments]



A white pistil and stamen all in one, enfolded in a red petal

10. FIND THE SPIRIT WITHIN

Is there a piece of God within each of us, some kind of “spark” or “true self”? Scripture doesn’t easily clarify this. However, quite clearly and consistently, the Judaic-Christian tradition reveals something else we can have inside: spirit.

To begin, Jewish scripture says that God made us alive by breathing into us the holy “*ruach*”: “breath” or “spirit” (Gen. 2:7). The two English words mean, in Hebrew, the same. Later, Exodus describes a man that YHWH “has singled out by name Bezalel...endowing him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge...” (35:31).

The Book of Isaiah says that “a spirit from on high is poured out on us,” and God tells us, “I am with you...for I am your God...” (32:15; 41:10). Psalms add that in “God’s city...God is in its midst” (46:5 and 51:10-12).

Jesus of Nazareth says, “[N]or will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within/among you” (Luke 17:21). The Gospel of Matthew often uses a slightly different phrase: the kingdom “of Heaven” is within or among you. Award-winning poet and translator Robert Bly says Matthew’s “kingdom of Heaven” would be translated more accurately as “kingdom of Spirit.” He argues that using the more general word “Heaven” has been a simple mistranslation that, historically, has been a grave disservice to Christianity, making everyone wait for Heaven instead of looking for it as “Spirit” in the here and now (xvi).

The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas speaks in a similar way. This gospel, discovered in 1945, is a simple list of 114 sayings of Jesus that were buried 1600-1800 years ago near Nag Hammadi. Some scholars argue that Thomas was written before the four standard Gospels and may have been a textual source for the first three of them. It was created, purportedly, by the same Doubting Thomas who, as a disciple of Jesus in the canonical Book of Acts, insisted on touching Jesus’ wounds. He also was known as a recorder or writer. In the Gospel of Thomas, he reports Jesus saying, “[D]ivine Reality exists inside and all around you. Only when you have come to know your true Self will you [realize] you are a child of the Living One” (Logion 3, Bauman).

Are the Gospel of Thomas’ words true? Richard Rohr, a modern Catholic priest, mystic, and advocate of Centering Prayer (a major type of Christian meditation) says that each of us is, within, a divine spark of God. This spark, he maintains, is a person’s “immortal diamond” and “True Self” that is “God [and] human...at the same time” (vii-xiv). This also is a major theme in Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*: the interaction of one’s own “I” or pure self with that of the “Thou” or Presence of God.

Spirit-within Meditations

Practice A: Finding Spirit. Choose your posture and take several deep breaths. Then say a simple prayer, verbal or silent: ask God to help you find, or give you, the Spirit within. Hold this thought for a minute. Then look for Spirit within. Where inside you is a lifting of weight or sense of less heaviness? Where does a light grow brighter or a love burn warmer if you look at it? Where is a steadying strength of fortitude?

Focus gently but thoroughly on any one of these or similar positive feelings, and let them grow. Allow them to fill you, give you wings, bring tears to your eyes, bring compassion to your heart, or lift your soul. In the future, simply return to them using your memory.

Practice B: Awareness of Awareness. *Start as above. Then as you become calm, look at your own awareness. Watch yourself watching. Be conscious of your consciousness. Bend your attentive focus back upon itself. You'll likely experience a brief instant of unconsciousness or of a darkness like an impenetrable cloud, or feel like you have been kicked out of the doorway you just tried to open. All three responses are a sign of your success. Keep trying for as many minutes as you can. Positive results often are measured by whether you experience more depth, calm, peace of mind, or relaxation in your body after several minutes of practice. Compare how knocking at this door affects you versus how you instead might have felt or acted without it.*

Comments

In my early years of meditating, I spent much time looking within myself for the part or chip of God that, said so many of the meditation books, is within. I found it by "looking at my own looking":—not much, I thought, to see there. Then I experienced an intense period, weeks long, in which all my thoughts, memories, emotions, and desires were peeled away until all I had was an intense awareness of reality around me and my body. I finally found a description of this experience three years later in an obscure Buddhist manuscript of essays as a "negative" or lowest level of nirvanic experience. I came out of it after a time. But always I remember that at my core, this is what my "I" is: that awareness.

[More comments]



Bee on a red heart surrounding by light-violet petals

11. LOOK IN THE CORE OF GIFTS AND FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Jewish and Christian traditions alike speak of spiritual gifts. The Tanakh talks of wisdom, insight, counsel, valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence, equity, justice, faithfulness, peace, calm, and confidence (Isa. 11:2-5 and 32:16-17).

Christian scripture says that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). In addition, the “Peace Prayer” by mystic saint Francis of Assisi suggests the gifts of peace, love, pardon, faith, hope, light, joy, consolation, understanding, love, forgiveness, and eternity.

Indeed, dozens of scientific studies in recent decades have connected such feelings with longevity and greater health. A similar number of studies have demonstrated that opposite feelings—such as rage, anxiety, and sadness—have negative physical consequences.

Many have experienced such feelings: for some, so much of a swelling of the fruit develops that it becomes a spiritual awakening. Such events are a part

of Presence: a swim in the stream of God. Capturing or rekindling them can help lift a person to their Source.

Gifts Meditations

Practice A: Past. Choose your posture and take several deep breaths. Then remember a time when you strongly felt such a gift or fruit. Recall where you were, what you were doing, and why or how. What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel, taste, or smell? Remember the entire incident as much as you can. Focus on the feeling of that gift—the fruit. Let it rest in the center of your mind or heart, clear and calm. Concentrate on or love it as attentively as you can. If you feel a Presence in its core, give yourself to it.

Practice B: Present. Whenever you find yourself in such an experience, above, let yourself go here and now. Let it soak into you like rays of sun on a cool day, or a warm shower in a cold room. Enjoy and appreciate it.

Practice C: Heart of the Fruit. Create the circumstances when you feel such gifts and absorb yourself in them, however brief or long.

For example, what is the point or moment at which you feel the greatest height or expanse of peace, beauty, or strength in a spiritual service? Look for the Presence within or behind it. Or when, how, and where do you feel the gift of being close to God in nature, gatherings of family, or in physical love? Look for the Presence in, above, or behind it. Go to an art museum, experience beauty, and look deeper for the core of the experience there in the gallery. Attend an event of music or dance, formal or informal, that is likely to open you to joy. As it lifts you on high, look for the center of the moving aesthetic pleasure inside you.

Comments

Hours in meditation do sometimes happen when I am showered with peace and joy, or it is more deeply infused in my heart. Dark days still happen. But on the best days, living in the world, on occasion I am filled by the light and goodness of being with family and friends, and even the kindness of

strangers can make just being alive a gift. Sometimes the sky and nature itself seem to announce to me in bold colors and loving sound, “All is one; you and I are made of bliss”—a benediction that can bring tears of thankfulness to me. Perhaps all of us have felt these blessings at some time. They are the gifts and fruit of love and Spirit.

[More comments]



Large, bright-yellow flower like the sun

12. GO TO GOD

Have you had an experience of some kind of spirituality? According to Gallup and Pew research surveys, 40-45% of Americans have. Whether it is a traditional white light descending from above, a transcendent experience of God in nature, a great upswelling of pure Love starting in your heart, or something similar, it's a common experience. During such events, whether you have felt God directly or indirectly, the core of each has a Presence.

But what, exactly, is "Presence"? Moses used to meet with God regularly, says the Torah, in a meeting tent, where they would talk face to face. One time, Moses said, "[S]how me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find favour in thy sight." God answered, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest" (Exod. 33:13-14, *Koren Jerusalem Bible*).

The Tanakh states that "the LORD Himself will...be with you..." (Deut. 31:8). "[T]he Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:9). "The LORD is near to all who call Him..." (Psalm 145:18). The Presence itself states, "Fear not, for I am with you...for I am your God..." (Isa. 41:10). "When you call Me, and come and pray to Me, I will give heed to you. You will search for

Me and find Me, if only you seek Me wholeheartedly. I will be at hand for you..." (Jer. 29:12-14).

The New Testament says, "Let us...approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace.... [S]ince we have confidence to enter the sanctuary [of] the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts..." (Heb. 4:16 and 10:19-22). "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev. 3:20).

So, Presence is waiting for you. It exists in many forms. Reach out to how you have felt it touch you in some way, and hang onto that. To recall intently enough is to recreate.

Remember, too, that one of the names Jesus calls God is "Abba." So does Paul of Tarsus, the author of many of the New Testament's Letters. They use this Aramaic word three times (Mark 14:36, Rom. 8:15, and Gal. 4:6). It is an affectionate term a child uses for a father, like "Papa" or "Dad." It conveys how Presence is similar to having a beloved parent—whether male or female—nearby. All the deeply beautiful, loving, peaceful events you have felt are pieces of the giant puzzle of Presence. Concentrate long enough on one, and they all begin to fit together into an experience of the loving Father-Mother God.

Practice A: Become Aware of the Presence You Know. *If you have had an experience of the Presence of God, Spirit, or True Self, you are off to a great start. In meditation, focus on it. What was it like? Where and when did this awareness happen: in or around your body, or externally, and under what circumstances?*

As you meditate, let the memory of the event be your doorway, your point of entry, your boat into Presence. Focus on the memory, even if nothing seems to happen. Recall it or simply rest in it attentively, mindfully waiting in that image or recollection. Then offer it to the Presence. Dwell in the interaction between the memory and the acceptance of it by Presence.

Practice B: Ask for Presence. *Say a simple prayer or request for the Presence to let you enter. You may do it verbally or in silent intentness. Ask as many times as you want in as many meditations as you wish.*

Sometimes you can mark your success by what happens immediately after: The Christian saint Augustine used to say, "Love God and do what you will," He meant that when you do achieve contact with Presence, what you then do or say in the next second often is the Spirit working through you. This occurs whether you are given a memory, feel a thrill down your spine, or jump up to go do the dishes. It becomes what you need at that moment as a person of the Spirit.

Comments

As I grow older, the more I meditate, the better I am able to "go to God." The experience usually is very brief, a few seconds in length, but each is a doorway into which I am allowed to peek. Knock, and the door will be opened. Present yourself at whatever opening works: front or back door, window, tunnel, or keyhole. Every attempt makes the next one ever so slightly easier.

[More comments]



Infinite water

13. EMBRACE THE DIVINE FEMININE

The female aspect of God is a strong tradition in the Tanakh. In Hebrew, She is known as *Chokhmah*, a feminine noun meaning “Wisdom.” In Greek, the same word is translated as “*Sophia*,” also feminine. In Proverbs, She speaks:

I, Wisdom...am understanding; courage is mine.... Those who love me I love.... The LORD created me at the beginning...at the origin of earth. There was still no deep...[n]o springs rich in water...[o]r the world’s first clumps of clay.... I was with [God] as a confidant.... Happy is the [hu]man who listens to me, [c]oming early to my gates each day, / Waiting outside my doors. / For [one] who finds me finds life.... All who hate me love death. (8:12-36)

The Book of Sirach adds more. In Judaism and Protestant Christianity, Sirach is apocryphal but well respected. In Christian Orthodox and Roman Catholic faiths, it is canonical. In Sirach, Wisdom waxes lyrical:

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High and covered the earth like a mist. [M]y throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss.... [M]y blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit. Come to me, you who desire

me, and eat your fill.... [T]he possession of me [is] sweeter than the honeycomb.... [T]hose who work with me will not sin. (24:3-22)

Can God be feminine? Two of the most important words for God in the Torah convey a biblical sense of the feminine. The first is *YHWH* (Yahweh and Jehovah in Christian scriptures). Scholars tell us the word is neither male nor female, but instead a difficult-to-translate verb meaning, roughly, “Am That Am” or “Will Be What Will Be.”

The second important word is *Elohim*. Scholars find it even harder to explain. The word’s roots suggest “the God who is he/she/it/god(s).”

Thus it was that *YHWH* and *Elohim* allowed a rooting of the feminine as divine in scriptures for thousands of years. In ancient Judaism, the Presence can be as much She as He. In later Judaism, the word *Shekhinah* is found in rabbinic writings in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash. It is a feminine noun meaning a special place or settling of the Presence. In modern Judaism, the word has taken on the meaning of a feminine Presence: the God(dess) who knows all you do and say, always forgiving, ever loving, and healing.

In early Christianity, the Aramaic of Jesus’ times used “Spirit” as a feminine word: some early Christian groups thought of the Holy Spirit as female. A few continued this tradition. Later, in medieval centuries, most of Christianity converged on Mary, Mother of God, to represent holy femininity. However, some mystics had a different viewpoint. Lady Julian of Norwich was one. In the 1300s, she famously declared, repeatedly, “God...is our Mother,” “the Trinity is our Mother,” and “our Saviour is our Very Mother in whom we be endlessly borne” (*Revelations*, pp. 122, 131, and 140). She managed to do so without being reprimanded or excommunicated.

Modern feminist scholars and mystics have resurrected the importance of the feminine aspect of God. In Judaism, the Tanakh’s Song of Songs and the Talmudic writings’ *Shekhinah* are being reinterpreted as exemplars of divine feminine Presence. In Christianity, scholars now say Mary Magdalene was a close companion of Jesus of Nazareth, and theologians like Cynthia Bourgeault, a mystic Protestant Christian priest, speak of “ChristoSophia” and similar divine-feminine concepts.

Meditations for Finding the Divine Feminine

Where is the divine feminine? She is Wisdom, and intuitive knowing. She awaits us in spiritual feelings sometimes called “fruit of the spirit”: experiences of love, peace, strength, beauty, and a physical

or emotional sense of wholeness. The same outer methods of meditation as in other sections of this book can be used specifically to seek Her.

Practice A: Breathe What She Is. Make yourself comfortable. Begin your meditation with long, slow, deep breaths. After a few minutes, imagine that hovering above you or in your heart is a large space where deep love, peace, beauty, or strength abides. Create a visual image of it, if you wish, or just feel its presence. Then, with each breath you take, inhale it into you. Hold it a few seconds, then gently let it out. Repeat this for ten minutes. Finish by resting in Her and telling Her thank you. You may increase the time and/or the fullness of what you inhale in each meditation session.

Practice B: Be Pregnant. Imagine or build the feeling of one of the qualities in “Practice A,” above. Then visualize yourself as a baby in its womb, resting peacefully. Or place the image or feeling in your own belly or heart, letting it grow slowly within you. If you have doubts or fear, give them to the female Presence.

Practice C: Vocalize or Move. Imagine or build the feeling of one of the qualities in “Practice A,” above. Focus on it. As you do so, move: let your arms, legs, and body gracefully circle and sway in whatever way they want as your attention holds onto the quality you have chosen. You also may make a joyful noise—with or without the movement: hum or sing, with or without words, to the quality you picked; utter a prayer or chant in any words of your choice as they come forth.

Practice D: Meditate with Closeness. Researchers James Coan and Erin Maresh report a “linear decrease” or healing of stress that starts at a negative baseline of “being alone,” then improves, positively, “to being with anyone”; then it becomes better yet when “being with a spouse”; and becomes best when “being with a spouse in a very high-quality relationship.” Similar positive results come from “even imagining the presence of a secure attachment figure.” In addition, holding hands enhances this effect (223).

Other multiple studies show massage also has similar effects. It creates the same decreases in pulse rate and blood pressure as does meditation. Its reasonable to conclude that closeness and touch are part of the approaching the Presence, especially the divine feminine.

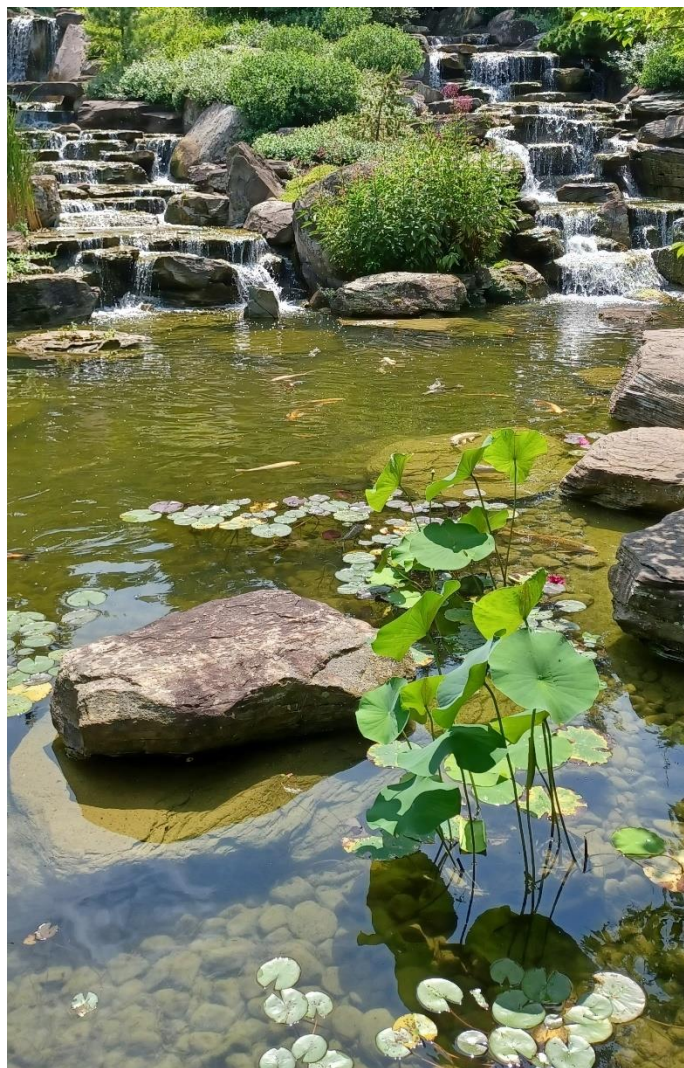
Try a sitting or walking meditation with someone you like or love. If appropriate, hold hands. Or share a quiet, loving, meditative massage with a partner. Alternatively, massage yourself—from head to foot at first—as gently or firmly as you wish, and then with a focus on parts of you that feel troubled or painful. Pay attention, too, to places that bring a wave of relaxation within you. In all of these activities, take your time and be mindful.

Practice E: Join Her. *If you have a sense of Her Presence—whether above, in your heart, or in the center of your own awareness—go to it. Find Her Core in any of the qualities above. Join Her over and again attentively by loving and holding Her close, or letting Her embrace you.*

Comments

Sometimes when I go to the Presence, She feels distinctly feminine. I have become ever more comfortable with this, over the years, thanks to a great marriage and several close friendships. When I give myself up in surrender, the divine feminine embraces me with love. In my mind, She is much warmer than the divine masculine. The latter of which is awesome and majestic, But She is more comforting.

[More comments]



Steps of granite up the stream to the source

© Frederik Meijer Gardens. Used by permission

14. CLIMB THE LADDER

What is “laddering” and where does it go? Throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures, we often look up. We pray, sing, and direct our praises to God on high—not God on low nor God to this side or that. Sometimes we go to the heart, yes. But then we’re directed to love God above.

Why? In meditation (and its many forms such as prayer, concentration, unfocused waiting, et al.), one of the most practical locations to which our bodies respond to Presence is above. This often is so whether high in the sky or just above our heads.

This apparently is human nature. Psychology often has recognized this upward movement, too. Not only is classic traditional psychology arranged as

the superego (higher mind), ego (logical mind and heart), and the down low (id, subconscious, and dark unconscious). Most psychological systems consider that your more positive and calmer parts are your heart; then, moving upward, rational talking and listening with your throat, mouth, and ears; creative and intuitive thinking using your higher brain; and, in spiritual practices, the light or Presence that often is said to come from above.

In the Torah, a significant spiritual ascent appeared to Jacob in his sleep in Genesis 28:12-13 and 16-17. “He had a dream; a stairway/ramp/ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and messengers of God were going up and down on it. And standing beside him was [YHWH]...” (Gen. 28:12-13). “Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely [YHWH] is present in this place, and I did not know it...! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven’” (Gen. 28:16-17).

In the Christian New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth often climbed for inspiration. Luke says, “Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives...” (21:37). He adds that Jesus “came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him” (22:39). Matthew mentions a specific climb: “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light” (17: 1-2).

What does “climbing high” mean in meditation? One simple answer is to focus at the crown of your head or just above it—the traditional place where the Spirit, the representative white dove, or a white light often becomes a first or early spiritual experience for many. And for others, an early experience often is of a Presence even higher—in the sky or, at least, far above and around us.

But if you have trouble reaching that high in meditation, use your ladder. Start with the heart. Then step up.

Laddering Meditations

Laddering helps us climb to the higher levels within and beyond ourselves in several steps. Sometimes it is easier to go high in this way, rather than to suddenly leap to the top in one step. Start with a minute or two of long, deep breathing. Then climb.

Practice A. Ascend from the Ground—Your Heart: Start your

meditation by focusing in your heart. You may use your hands or fingertips, if you wish, to touch your heart or the center of your chest. Place your awareness on that point for 10 to 60 seconds or more. Then move your focus (and your fingertips) upward to the center of your throat. Keep your attention there for a brief time, and then move it up to a point between your eyebrows. Let your awareness stay there for a bit. Then touch or move your focus to the crown of your head—the very top. Rest there in that top area for five or ten minutes. If you wish, you may extend your attention higher yet, as long as you are able to maintain your focus. Then finish with several long, deep breaths.

Practice B. Quickly Ascend from the Throat or Eyebrows: *Do the same as above, but start at a higher point, such as your throat or between your eyebrows.*

Practice C. Descend—How To Step Down: *Work your way up to the top of your head. Feel the calmness, peace, and stillness there. Then slowly, in reverse order, move your focus down to the spot between your eyebrows, your throat, then your heart. Let the calmness from the top of your head descend with you, or descend, pull it downward with you. You also may draw it down to a place of pain or discomfort in your body.*

Comments

Some days, my spirit lags. I find myself unable to reach the higher points within or above on which I like to meditate. Instead, I start with my heart: a refuge when the world besets me. I then climb a ladder upward. If I use my love, I can climb more easily.

[More comments]



A gushing trout stream

15. BECOME AS WATER

When our bodies grow calm and our inner selves feel deeply at peace, an inner awareness of just being in our own true spirit sets in. It is a quiet gift of the spirit that can bring joy and pleasure.

Scientifically, such calmness engages biological mechanisms. It catalyzes the parasympathetic nervous system's "rest and digest" response." It increases the calming hormones dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin. We get previews of this spiritual fruit in brief moments of pleasure when we experience runner's high, the pleasures of beautiful art or nature, deep-seated enjoyment of family and friends, and the positive effects of strong hugs and good physical love.

The feelings can vary from a sublime sense of inner glow to stronger sensations of bodily pleasure. Both wash over us like water. They are the feelings of a job especially well done, a piercingly beautiful song, the thrill along your spine or limbs of a great performance, painting or sculpture. They fall through us like a gentle rain, electric tingle, or warming fire. When it occurs, it is healing. Traditional Buddhist and Hindu scriptures call it *jhana* and *dharmamegha*, a rain or fire that washes or burns away troubles, doubts, and negative emotions. In the Judaic-Christian tradition, it often is portrayed as an experience that feels like water.

In Judaism, this becoming as water can be holy. Prophet Jeremiah refers to God as the source "of living waters" (17:13). God says in Isaiah, "Pour down, O skies, from above! Let the heavens rain down victory" (45:8)! These are symbols, yes, but also more: physically felt inner experiences. Isaiah adds, "You shall be like a watered garden, [l]ike a spring whose waters do not fail" (58:11). The Song of Songs is an extended metaphor on the pleasures of

believing in God. The Dead Sea Scrolls, written by Jewish Essenes ca. 150 BCE-70 CE, describe a “fountain of waters” that are “the eternal...unending fountain of glory..., the well of knowledge” (Hanson 8, 104).

Jesus of Nazareth also speaks in the Christian scriptures of meditative waters. How can someone be born again, asks Nicodemus? He has come secretly at night because he is a Pharisee and a member of the ruling Sanhedrin, many of whom disapprove of Jesus. Jesus tells him that he must be “born from above...of water and Spirit” (John 3.3 & 5).

And later, Jesus breaks doubly from the rules of his Galilean culture by talking to a female stranger who also is a Samaritan. They meet at a well. He tells her, “[T]hose who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

We have our own brief windows opening upon this experience. By practicing the life of the Spirit, we are given more of it—truly a feast.

Water Meditation: Becoming Water

Practice 1: Feel Your Waters: *In meditation, go to your window or door to Presence. Let it enter your body, down as far as you can. Stay open to it. You may feel your “waters” first as a pleasant chill in your back, or perhaps a gentle rushing in your limbs. Keep focusing on Presence as you accept the feelings as something good.*

Practice 2: Allow Pleasure. *Listen to the most beautiful music you can, look at art that brings you a physical response, dance such that you are beauty itself, or otherwise engage in an activity that brings gentle or strong pleasure coursing through you. Let it spread. Think of it as a gift. Let it flow into new places within you, relax you, and heal.*

Practice 3: Try Mindful Massage. *Choose a time and place as you would for meditation. You can practice this alone or share with another. Thin clothing or bare skin is helpful, but do stay warm enough. Start with a comfortable posture and a few minutes of deep breathing.*

Then mindfully focus on yourself by rubbing your skin. Start with the top of your head or your hands and arms. Rub as gently or firmly as you wish, and covering each part. Include head, arms, and shoulders, and move downward until you finish with your toes. As you massage,

let your muscles relax and your lungs continue good breathing.

If you can, give the experience to the Presence, or feel the Presence coming into you like a flow of water or gentle, warm electricity. If you find an area that is tight or painful, you may focus on it for several minutes: rubbing it will help bring more oxygen to it, aiding in its healing or relaxation. Finish with a few long, deep breaths.

Comments

At times, now, when I meditate, I feel as if a gentle rain is falling upon me. It ushers in a great calm and healing of troubles and discomforts. I deeply appreciate the gifts and fruit of the Spirit it brings. (Isaiah 11:2, Galatians 5:22-23).

[More comments]

*Dawn*

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS MEDITATION?

This is a curious question at the end of a book offering dozens of methods for it. Most people have an intuitive sense of what meditation might be.

I had my own problems with understanding the word. When I first tried “official” meditation in 1965, I was 16, and few Westerners—especially young Protestant teens—knew much about it. I sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor, closed my eyes, and stared unblinking at a candle flame. My annoyance grew as my mind kept straying and my eyes watering. Finally, half an hour was over. I felt sore, grouchy, and wet of cheek. In the following weeks, I added a cushion and tried two more times. No magic happened. My mind kept churning, my body aching. I decided I was done, maybe forever.

What I didn’t realize was that I’d already been meditating for the past three summers. When I was 13, I’d started driving my dad’s tractor up and down endless farm rows each day, watching the beauty of the sky, clouds, and birds. But eventually, I became bored. I started making up mental games.

My favorite was to imagine a picture of a person, hold it in my mind for five or ten minutes, and see what other images and words would come to it. Then I would take each of those, one by one, and hold them for several

minutes, observing what would attach itself to each.

Little did I know that I was practicing a classic type of meditation similar to methods with Jewish and Christian roots (developed from Moses in *lectio divina*), Socratic and Platonic philosophy (Chase), and Hindu-Buddhist *jnana* yoga. And for that matter, simply watching all the beauty of nature around me now is called “forest bathing” and is recognized by over two thousand scientific reports (Siah).

So, just what, then, is “meditation”? As a spiritual practice, it commonly is defined as “attentive focus for the purpose of inner (spiritual) growth.” In its most general meaning, it covers a lot of ground.

In its widest meaning, meditation can cover such practices as sitting, lying, standing, and walking meditation. It can be practiced as prayer, chant, and spiritual song and dance. You also can take a mindful walk in nature or in an art museum, or listen mindfully to beautiful music. It also can be communing deeply with others in a religious service, a family gathering, or in love. Yoga and other mindful exercise also can be meditative, as can using ascetic withdrawal, psychedelics for spiritual purposes, and attentive fasting.

Spiritual meditation is not a wandering mind. It is controlled or focused. It is not stream-of-consciousness thinking or remembering. It is not a trance state or a semiconscious slumber. It requires fully alert and awake perception and observation.

Instead, spiritual meditation usually attempts to get rid of most or all thoughts and emotion. At most, you might concentrate on one thought. Many forms use or seek no ideas at all.

One-thought methods of spiritual meditation might involve using a single image or sound for spiritual meditation: for example, a candle flame or visual memory of a spiritual experience, or a repetitive chant or humming. Praying also counts if you are directing each word to the Presence of God.

You also can use meditation to counter thoughts. You make a conscious choice to become the Observer of your thinking, backing off to a neutral standpoint, and wait for them to slow down or stop. The same often is done with negative emotions, especially in therapy. In either case, the goal of spiritual meditation is to have a mind that is mostly or completely calm and silent. And in relative silence, you can wait and see what happens, or use intuition to draw spiritual experiences toward you, or you to them.

Is Meditation Historical?

Spiritual meditation in its broader definitions is a constant in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Dreams, encounters with fires and angels, reception

of God's gifts—they're all part of our Judaic-Christian heritage.

Meditation itself appears to be mentioned by name in the Jewish Tanakh. Psalms 1:1-3 says, "Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the Tora of the Lord [the living word from Moses] and in his Tora he meditates day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season; its leaf also shall not wither..." (*Koren Jerusalem Bible*). Some translations of the Tanakh describe Moses as going out to the fields to "meditate" at evening time [Gen. 24:63 in *KJB (Koren Jerusalem Bible)*, *Metsudah Chumash*, *Rashi Chumash*, *Modernized Tanakh*, et al.].

In addition, authors of some of the Psalms and of the Song of Songs appear to suggest meditating on nature and beauty. And the Dead Sea Essenes recommend it in their orders of procedure (Hanson).

If you count "prayer" as a form of meditation, then in the Christian New Testament, Jesus frequently went away from others so he could meditate. Luke 6:12-13, for example, says, "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God." This example occurred just before "he called his disciples and chose twelve of them...."

Medieval practitioners include many luminaries. Jewish mystics developed the *Sefer Yetzira (Book of Creation)*, a numbers-and-letters mysticism. From it and other sources, several famous mystics created the Kabbala and its symbols to use in meditation. Solomon de Piera was a noted poet mystic.

In medieval Christianity, the Desert Stylites were monks and mystics who lived in the desert, often on pillars, sometimes in caves or self-made humble dwellings. Saint Augustine of Hippo became a pillar of early Christian spirituality and theology. Others include Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Examples of modern Judaic-Christian practitioners include such well-known names as Cynthia Bourgeault, Martin Buber, Israel ben Eliezer, Thomas Keating, Abraham Isaac Kook, Yael Levy, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, Teilhard de Chardin, Howard Thurman, Alan Watts, Simon Weil, and more.

Is Meditating Common? Is It Scientific?

What about spiritual experiences in general? Are they unusual in the American population, or are they "normal"?

A 2002 Gallup Poll asked people to rate the following statement on a scale of 0 ("does not apply") to 5 ("applies completely"): "I have had a profound religious experience or awakening that changed the direction of my life." A total of 41% "said the statement applies *completely* to them." When projected to all Americans, that's 80 million people. In the poll, age made little difference.

Of those with no religious preference, “even 25%...said the statement completely applied to them, as did 27% of people who said they rarely or never attend religious services.”

And the number may be rising. In 1962, when Gallup first asked this question, only 20% responded with “applies completely.” Then in the ’70s-80s, the positive responses rose to about 33%. When the question was repeated in 2002, the answer was 41%.

A 2023 Pew Research Center survey also reports several statistics about Americans’ spirituality. It notes that “45% say they have had a sudden feeling of connection with something from beyond this world.”

But even if you haven’t had such an experience, scientists now are proving the benefits of practicing meditation. According to the bestseller *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* by Harvard psychologists Goleman and Davidson, over two thousand studies of meditation had been conducted at the time of publication of their book in 2018. Many more are completed each year. Most studies, the authors of *Traits* conclude, show meditation causes a decrease in stress—lower blood pressure and pulse rates—and many report general increases in health and the ability to focus.

Recent scientific research of controlled experiments with psychedelic “trips”—a form of meditation—shows dramatic improvement in PTSD and other calming effects; they occur even among those who consider themselves nonbelievers (Scoles). Other bestsellers about meditation help confirm meditation’s science and psychology: e.g., Marianne Bentzen’s *Neuroaffective Meditation: A Practical Guide*; Hanson and Mendius’ *Buddha’s Brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love, & wisdom*, and Robert Wright’s *Why Buddhism Is True*.

What are major methods or patterns of meditation?

In my more than sixty years of meditating, I’ve learned that one helpful way to understand all the many practices is to group them into four major compass points.

The first two are about your *method of focus*. You can choose a specific spot such as your heart, or you might prefer to keep a wide or open-focus attitude or stance.

The second set are about inner vs. outer. Some people like to meditate within themselves. Others prefer to focus on something or someone well outside of their own body, such as a holy person, a sense of God in nature, or a being such as an angel.

Here are the four compass points:

Compass Points for Meditating

Single focus:

A specific spot/location

Inner/immanent:

Within or close by



Outer/transcendent:

Beyond oneself

Open Focus:

Wide or waiting

You can travel in any direction you wish. You may go left, right, up, or down; or you can go at an angle between these four points. All of them eventually lead to the same location, and just as surely or quickly, depending on the person: the sacred experience of Presence.

Descriptions of the Four Primary Directions

- (1) **Single focus** (specific spot). What people often think of when they imagine traditional sitting meditation. May include visualizing (a candle, a color, a picture of a spiritual figure, a sunset, a tree, a melody), chanting (a repetitive prayer line or word such as "Elohim," a song note you hum), or a point within your body (your heart, above your head, on a pain)
- (2) **Open focus** (wide or waiting). Often occurs or is present in religious services in general, Christian Centering Prayer, forest bathing (open/wide focus attention when in nature), clearing your own mind and waiting to see what happens, and other open-waiting silent-prayer forms
- (3) **Inner/immanent**. Happening within or close to your own body, such as meditations in the heart and love, of the mind and mental concentration, and in or near other parts of your personal physical sphere
- (4) **Outer/transcendent**. Well beyond your personal self, such as a feeling of Presence everywhere, a focus on a guru or teacher, contact with someone or something beyond mortal

life, or even a deep spiritual communion with loved ones

Two special forms of meditation also are worth noting. One is the currently popular “mindfulness.” It is an ancient Buddhist concept expressed in the 1960s as “Be Here Now” (reversible as “Here Be Now” and “Now Be Here”) in a popular book by the same name by former Harvard psychologist Baba Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), a colleague of Timothy Leary. In that same era, the Reverend Alan Watts published many popular books on Zen Buddhism and Taoism in which he explained it as the practice of presentness or living in the now.

More recently, it has spread widely as a Zen Buddhist concept thanks in part to mindfulness books by the “Father of Modern Mindfulness,” Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. He explains that mindfulness is a wonderful daily practice of learning to fully focus on exactly what you are doing in the instant: if you are washing the dishes, he says, then just wash them—paying attention to nothing else, within or without.

If you are practicing mindfulness for spiritual purposes, then it is meditation. However, it also has been adopted for common use in many nonspiritual applications. For example, it is popular as a business concept for productivity. And armed forces in several nations use it for training their recruits in such skills as endurance and riflery.

The other noteworthy concept related to meditation is “contemplation.” Roman Catholic Christians describe it as a separate step that occurs after meditation. In this understanding, meditation brings you closer to the Presence of God. Then, once you have union with the Presence, you use “contemplation” to receive the spiritual results within you.

Some Roman Catholic theologians talk about it in terms of ascent and descent. First, you ascend to your connection with Presence. Then you receive descents of spiritual gifts, fruit, or changes within you from that Source.

These are useful definitions for proceeding once you’ve established a strong connection to Presence. However, it’s important to point out that even as the second step, contemplation, happens, one should continue focus on the source. It is much like, on a hot day, you must continue sipping from the straw even as you feel the cold drink slide down into your stomach. Thus “contemplation” can be imagined as either a second step after meditation or a part of it.

Conclusion: The “I-Thou” of Meditation

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s concept of “I-Thou” is yet another way to understand what meditation is: a communication. Buber first describes how

all genuine interactions between two people are of a real “I” with a real “Thou”: for example, my true, underlying presence with yours.

Then Buber explains that an “I-it” interaction is very different, sometimes a polar opposite. In an “I-it” interchange, one person’s genuine “I” is treating another person as an it, a thing: a product, project, or number. If I am treating you as an it, you become to me something I choose to manipulate, rather than a living, breathing presence.

The same “I-Thou” relationship holds true, Buber argues, when we communicate with God, or God with us. Our genuine “I” reaches out to God’s “Thou.” And God’s “I” speaks to our “Thou.” It is a fundamental, core-to-core conversation.

The wide landscape of meditation for inner growth, with all its branches and possibilities, is an “I-Thou” relationship. We are trying to interact with Presence. Worship, breathing, singing, dancing, imaging—bathing in forest, art, or family—all are acceptable, sometimes necessary, if they deliver us to God and that Presence to us.



Many Flowers with Purple Petals and Green Centers

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About the Author

Richard Jewell has a B.A. in Philosophy from Monmouth College, an M.A. in Theology and a Master of Divinity from San Francisco Theological Seminary, and an M.A. in English from St. Cloud State University. He began meditating in 1962.

Richard retired in 2019 from Inver Hills College, a school in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MinnState). He was tenured in the English and the Humanities Departments. Earlier, he taught for five years as a full-time composition specialist for the English Department of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.



Read or download Richard's meditation books at www.Meditationary.org, www.YogaSutras.org, and www.BodyMeditation.org. Or go to www.RichardJewell.org.

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For more information and the author's email address, go to www.RichardJewell.org.